IJELLH
International Journal of English Language, Literature and Humanities

Volume III Issue I March 2015- ISSN 2321-7065

David Mamet's *American Buffalo*: Exploring the Problematic of Language, Friendship, and Masculinity

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Abstract:

David Mamet's *American Buffalo* (1975) is a dramatized probe into money economy and its relation to moral, ontological, and epistemological questions. The play unravels the myth of the American Dream and American (per) versions of free enterprise and satirizes rapaciously self-interest-centric American liberal principles. This paper is an attempt to see how Mamet problematizes money economy through the problematic of language economy by structuring his playaround aporetic conversations and disjointed dialogues as well as fierce language of volatile male characters. It is also an endeavour to look at theproblematic of friendship, introduced at the very beginning of the play, and unstable masculinity and homosocial desire born of misogyny and homophobia.

David Mamet's tightly wrought 1975 play *American Buffalo* explores the theme of economic reality and its relation to moral, ontological, and epistemological issues. Mamet dramatizes the attempted escape from the money economy, showing the philosophical dilemmas raised by money. In this context, this paper is an attempt to explore the problematic of language, friendship, and masculinity in the play.

The play is a 'city comedy'[1] in the sense that, very generally, it is set in city or place—a junk shop—, and dedicated to matters of finance and/or commodity exchange—legal and illegal alike. The claustrophobic atmosphere of Don's junk shop accentuates the stage—the closed world in which the three characters operate. The play problematizes money economy through the problematic of language economy. The first act establishes it as the primary concern of the play, when Don gives lessons on business to Bob.

Jon Dietrick observes that one of the preoccupations of the play is the distinction, or the lack of one, between talk and action. Don says to Bob, that "action talks and bullshit walks" (Mamet 4). It is another way of saying that action talks and talk acts—that action is talk and talk is action. This seemingly is a central truth of the work. That Don is both aware of this paradox and he is troubled by it is clear in the way he tries repeatedly to control the talk of other characters in the play. When Teach, in an attempt to replace Bob as Don's accomplice in the planned robbery, subtly refers to Bob's heroin addiction, Don interjects, "I don't want you mentioning that," (Mamet 34) and a few lines later, "I don't want that talk. . ." (Mamet 34). In the second act there are two more instances of Don's trying to limit the talk of Teach. When Teach, trying to eliminate Fletcher from the robbery, tells Don that he's "full of shit," Don responds "Don't tell me that. . ." and ". . . I don't want that talk" (Mamet 74). In another instance, when Teach tells Don near the end of the play that Fletcher cheats at cards, Don responds, "You're telling me this? . . . I don't want to hear it" (Mamet 80). Don rightly fears the talk of Teach. Dietrick concludes that these instances of Don trying to limit what other characters say demonstrate his understanding of talk as action, as that which creates reality rather than merely representing or referring to a reality outside that talk (332-333).

The naturalistic language retains its power in what it reveals. In *American Buffalo*,the force of the language Mamet's characters speak lies in what it attempts to conceal. Teach retreats into aggressive language which is designed to mask his paranoid fears, but on both levels, i.e. what it reveals and what it attempts to conceal, it proves inoperative and this aphasia suggests his inability to shape experience into meaning. The play is structured around

aporetic conversation and disjointed dialogue as well as fierce language of volatile male characters. Mamet does not celebrate nihilism or masculinity, but explores the link between society's values and its brutality. The nature of his characters' language, however, originates in society. Reflected in dramatic speech, this society is chaotic and valueless, with no coherency or community. As Douglas Bruster says, those who would see only the language of the vulgar class in *American Buffalo* miss the larger social—sometimes metaphysical—intentions and implications of the play. It appears that Mamet means Teach, Don and Bobby to represent the breadth of the American society (Bruster 53).

Don is deeply suspicious of appearances and desperate for solid foundations. He is troubled by ambiguities involved in signification. He says to Bob, "Things arenot always what they seem to be" (Mamet 8). Teach is on the other hand the perfect antagonist to Don, he says to Bob, "Things are what they are" (Mamet 39). Teach insists on a self-evident, extralingual[2], and essential reality.

Both Don and Teach recognize the inherent ambiguity of language, but whereas Don fears this ambiguity as an obstacle to the 'truth', Teach welcomes it as a means to attain power. Teach's talk threatens to poison Don's paternal relationship with Bob as well as to smear the reputation of Fletcher for whom Don has great respect. As a reaction, Don attempts to prevent both by limiting the speech acts (Dietrick 337).

Teach embodies the anxiety associated with money. For him, talk is always manipulative, useful in getting others to act in a certain way. This is why he is so shocked to learn at the end of the play that all the planning he and Don have done in the course of the day was based on a lie—Bob had claimed that he saw the coin buyer, their intended victim, with a suitcase, apparently leaving on a trip, but finally he reveals that he did not. When it is revealed, Teach explodes (Mamet 102-103). It is however not the lie per se that so shakes Teach but what he sees as its unselfishness—Bob had nothing to gain from it except the love and respect of Don. But for Teach, the world is essentially centred on self-interest. In one instance, Teach defines 'free enterprise', the lynchpin of American culture as "the freedom of the individual, to embark on any fucking course that he sees fit, in order to secure his honest chance to make a profit. Without this, we're just savage shitheads in the wilderness, sitting around some vicious campfire" (Mamet 72-73). Teach believes that competition is central to laissez-faire capitalism, and that competition flourishes best when business practices are free

of government meddling. When Bobby selflessly confesses his lie, Teach sees what he upholds, his belief in the laissez-faire capitalism, threatened and shattered (Dietrick 341-342).

Mamet defines ‘the American (Dream) Myth’ as the expectation of getting something from nothing and which he views as the basis of the economic life. “And this also affects the spirit of the individual. It’s very divisive. One feels one can only succeed at the cost of someone else” (qtd. in Weber 140). The force exerted upon the ordinary man by the heartlessness of the economic system is so strong that Teach is willing to abandon even the thin patina of legality and resort to violence if necessary (Weber 140). For Teach, American (per)versions of free enterprise become a license to rob (Roudané 62), the planned robbery—which fails to materialize—is their business opportunity. His ridiculous and violent tirade near the end of the play becomes a shrill parody of the very ideals he wishes to aspire, justifying that without his ‘honest’ opportunity to achieve wealth, he is a “just savage shithead in the wilderness” (Roudané 62).

Mamet satirizes urban venality—the use of a position of trust for dishonest gain—and the ethical system perverted by greed. Teach is a smoothly persuasive, sometimes belligerently charlatan figure. Mamet’s characters assume positions of importance in America’s business-oriented culture. The characters are bent more on sheer survival. Significantly, much of the playwright’s ideology seems to assume the principle of natural selection. Struggling in society, his characters attempt to carve niches for themselves through language. Often they try to adopt what they believe to be the formal, ordered rhetoric of a more successful class. Teach tries in vain to convince himself of the justness of his morality, stating that “someone is against me, that’s their problem” (Mamet 11) before profoundly concluding, in a weighty piece of judgement: “The only way to teach these people is to kill them” (Mamet 11). According to Douglas Bruster (50-51), this is wisdom of lasting significance to Teach. Teach states his belief so judiciously—as if he has spent long hours in philosophic contemplation of the matter—that it indicates a desire to have his proverb accepted as sincere. His sentence, if disturbing, is for once complete. Yet his maxim makes little impression upon his companions in the shop; Don merely proceeds to ask Teach if he would like any coffee. The significance of such a line rests not only in its ironic dark humour, but also in the fact that when Teach philosophizes eloquently—but obtusely—upon human existence, frames his remarks in the mock formal rhetoric of a higher class. In Mamet’s world, to survive is to *seem* to succeed.

In American slang, the word 'buffalo' means 'to pressurize' or 'to intimidate'.[3] Usually this meaning carries with it some sense of trickling or fooling the person 'buffaloed'. Thus the sovereign of America's business culture is indeed the buffalo, the mascot of the charlatan's trade. Mamet shows the difference, or the lack of difference, between the contemporary criminal and businessman.

Mamet himself has said that *American Buffalo* "is about the American ethic of business . . . About how we excuse all sorts of great and small betrayals and ethical compromises called business" (qtd. in Roudané 58). C. W. E. Bigsby calls it "a savage satire on the collapse of American values, on the process whereby American liberal principles have been accommodated to a rapacious self-interest. It enacts the disintegration of community and the failure equally of language and morality" (qtd. in Zinman 61-62).

The second concern of this paper—problematic of friendship—is introduced at the very beginning of the play. Don's philosophical statement, "You don't have friends in this life," (Mamet 8) holds centrality to this question. This ambiguous statement can be interpreted as declaratively, cynically refusing to believe in the possibility of friendship, or as interrogatively, reflecting on the idea of Aristotelian political friendship—"O my friends, there is no friend!" Don is talking to Bob, his young and devoted friend, and the whole play turns on the betrayal of friendships, the belated reassertion of friendship's claims, and the collision between the cynical amorality of Teach and the feeble humanity of Don. Toby Silverman Zinman maintains that the central conflict of the play lies in Don's belief in the importance of having friends in life (64).

Derrida problematizes the Aristotelian apostrophe "O my friends, there is no friend" which states the death of friends.[4]Although there isperformative contradiction in "O my friends, there is no friend," it does not say "there is no friendship," but rather "there is no friend." It is, perhaps, because the friend does not conform to the idea of friendship. The common friendships are not perfect and one cannot see the friend as one's 'ideal double'. Again, it is addressed to 'my friends' who might be our 'non-ideal doubles', friends whom we want to see as our own ideal image but they fail to become the same as us and have some otherness in them. So, does it make the ideal friend strictly another manifestation of our own self which is impossible to find in others? If we answer in affirmative, the friend becomes internal and not external, and thus, an imaginary concept. Hence there is no friend, or there

cannot be any friend. On the other hand, if we negate the notion that finding the ideal friend is not impossible, is it because we do not have the right understanding of friend and friendship for which we say that there is no friend?

So, the question becomes "What is friendship in the proper sense?" If we impose our own ideal image on the concept of the ideal friend, is friendship the experience, or rather the possibility (since "there is no friend") of seeing ourselves in the other? If friendship is explicitly linked to virtue, justice, and to moral and political reasons, what are the various conditions for an authentic friendship? If friendship depends upon the act of loving unconditionally; is then, loving unconditionally the only condition for establishing friendship? If we consider the friendship between Don and Bob, the answer is, perhaps, yes.

Another important aspect of the play is unstable masculinity and homosocial desire. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick describes homosocial desire as a "pattern of male friendship, mentorship, entitlement, rivalry, and hetero- and homosexuality . . . in an intimate and shifting relation to class" (qtd. in Radavich 70). This reference of class may be expanded to include age, rank, and other social factors creating a functional inequality (Radavich 70). In *American Buffalo*, there is a desire for dominance, between the male characters, most evidently in Teach, who are of unequal rank and age, battling with an equally strong desire for loyalty and acceptance, resulting in a hard-won, intense, fundamentally unstable intimacy established in the absence of women. The play projects an intense triangular relationship among Don, Bob, and Teach. Don maintains his supremacy through his financial control of Bob and through his role as teacher/mentor. This is the central if unequal bond of the play. Teach poses a threat to this bond—he recognizes it and hopes to establish his own relationship with Don by replacing Bob and ousting Fletcher. The play is however both misogynistic and homophobic—Teach denigrates women ("Only . . . from the mouth of a Southern bulldyke asshole ingrate of vicious nowhere cunt can this trash come" [Mamet 10-11]) and in order to vent his frustration, he resorts to images of impotency/emasculation (". . . dick on the chopping block" [Mamet 103]). The play clearly shows Mamet's conviction of what America is about, the corrosive, hierarchical system seeking power through the feminization and defeat of an 'other'.

IJELLH
International Journal of English Language, Literature and Humanities
Volume III Issue I March 2015- ISSN 2321-7065

Notes:

[1] For elaborate discussion on this topic, see Bruster 41-56.

[2]Intralingual meaning is concerned with word-word relations, i.e. relations between verbal signs and other signs, while extralingual meaning on the other hand involves word-world relations, bringing into consideration the world of experience.

[3] The verb 'buffalo' as 'North American slang' means "to overpower, overawe, or to constrain by superior force or influence; to outwit, perplex" (Supplement to Oxford English Dictionary).

[4] For elaborate views on the question of friendship, see "Loving in Friendship: Perhaps – the Noun and the Adverb" (26-48), and "This Mad 'Truth': The Just Name of Friendship" (49-74) in Jacques Derrida's *The Politics of Friendship*.

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